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ABSTRACT

Private liberal arts junior colleges reached their peak during the 1940's, when nearly 350 of them provided an educational alternative for over 100,000 students nationwide. In 1989, only 89 private two-year institutions were in existence, accounting for less than 1% of the nation's two-year college students. Following the second World War, several factors combined to stem the expansion of private junior colleges including the introduction and growing strength of public community colleges, the demands of World War II veterans for educational opportunities, and financial constraints brought on by small enrollments. While enrollments have declined significantly, the Association of American Colleges in 1975 stressed the importance of maintaining a system of private education, highlighting its ability to add diversity, provide leadership, offer competition to the public system and save the taxpayers money. The most serious threats to private junior colleges are competition for students from public community colleges and financial constraints. Proposals to solve these problems include establishing cooperative programs to share resources with local community colleges, employment of part-time faculty, and more heterogeneous recruitment and curriculum development, particularly in the church-related colleges. The potential for private junior colleges to survive into the 21st century depends upon their ability to effectively market their strengths, expand their enrollment bases, operate in a fiscally responsible manner, and maintain strong leadership and a committed faculty. (JMC)

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by Dana Nicole Williams

DECEMBER 1989

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DIGEST

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December 1989 **EDO-JC-89-07**

The Survival of Private Junior Colleges

Dana Nicole Williams

Private liberal arts junior colleges reached their peak during the 1940's, when nearly 350 of them provided an educational alternative for over 100,000 students nationwide. In 1989, only 89 private two-year institutions were still in existence, accounting for less than 1% of the nation's two-year college students. In recent years, a debate has arisen concerning the continued viability of private two-year colleges and their ability to compete with public community colleges, proprietary schools, and universities.

This digest will trace the history of the private junior college in the United States, examine its strengths as a distinctive educational alternative, discuss the threats to its continued survival, and review strategies proposed by private college advocates to ensure the continuation of this institution into the 21st century.

Historical Background

Lasell Female Academy, the first private liberal arts college, was established in 1851, as part of a reform movement that attempted to provide a greater portion of the population with access to higher education. However, it was not until the turn of the century that the real growth of these junior colleges began. Numerous churches and some independent educators formed junior colleges and several four-year institutions established affiliated colleges to provide the first two years of higher education. The number of private two-year colleges grew until it reached its zenith in the 1940's.

Following the second World War, several factors combined to stem the expansion of private junior colleges:

- the introduction and growing strength of public community colleges;
- the demands of World War II veterans for educational opportunities; and
- financial constraints brought on by small enrollments (Woodroof, 1990a).

Between 1940 and 1960, 76 private junior colleges closed. An even larger number closed between 1960 and 1988, with 103 closing in the 1960's alone. Some of these schools added junior and senior years and became baccalaureate degree granting institutions; others joined forces with local universities; and many more simply closed their doors in the face of rising costs and declining enrollments.

Institutional Characteristics

Woodroof's (1990b) profile of the 89 private junior colleges currently operating in the United States provides the following statistics:

- 66% have enrollments of fewer than 600 students; 40% have enrollments of fewer than 400 students; and only 10% have enrollments over 1,000 students.
- 33% are single-sex colleges, and 13% have only recently become co-ed institutions.
- the average age of these institutions is 80 years, with 34% founded between 1890 and 1945.
- in 1986, the average tuition was $4,800 per year, with total student costs estimated at $6,900.
- in 1983, 26% of their income was accounted for by tuition and fees; 45% by gift income; and 25% by auxiliary income.

Major Strengths

Advocates of private junior colleges point to a number of ways in which these institutions provide an important educational option to students who may feel ill at ease in larger institutions, to those who were inadequately prepared for college in high school, and to those who cannot afford the costs of private four-year colleges (Hoffman, 1990). In 1975, the Association of American Colleges stressed the importance of maintaining a system of private education, highlighting its ability to add diversity, offer competition to an otherwise all-embracing public system, provide a center of academic freedom removed from political influence, maintain a deep commitment to liberal learning and concern for human and individual personality, provide leadership, and save the taxpayers money. Recently, Hoffman supported these claims, arguing that private colleges have more opportunities than public institutions to "devise creative and dynamic programs with an ethical and moral base to address the deep-

rooted and pervasive confusion in American society" (p.10).

Woodroof (1990b) considers the loyalty and love of teaching typical of private junior college faculty to be a major strength of these institutions. "Private junior college faculty are people who have learned to live on less (approximately 32% less than their public community college counterparts) in order to enjoy the intangible benefits of teaching in a small, comfortable environment, working with other faculty and students of similar religious backgrounds or moral beliefs, and helping the individual student succeed" (p.79). "Their commitment to the liberal arts and to the role of the teacher is remarkably strong. Perhaps this strength will stay the final demise of the private junior college" (p.80).

Strategies for Survival

The most serious threats to private junior colleges are competition for students from public community colleges and financial limitations. Mitchell (1990) contends that the use of sophisticated marketing techniques, differentiation, and innovation are keys to enrollment growth in the 1990's. He suggests that "small size, shared values, and a common understanding of institutional mission and purpose are not only key attributes of the private junior college but also pivotal elements for a marketing strategy necessary for internalization" (p.21).

Fields (1990) argues that church-related colleges can broaden their base of potential students by becoming less sectarian and more heterogeneous in both recruitment approaches and curriculum development. He describes how Spartanburg Methodist College in South Carolina reversed declining enrollment trends by strengthening and broadening its religious activities to welcome a more religiously diverse student body.

Hoffman (1990) suggests a different strategy for ensuring the future viability of private junior colleges. He foresees an enduring place for private two-year institutions as providers of "a solid and complete education" and "the necessary expertise for a career or paraprofessional position at about half the cost of a four-year college" (p.10). He advocates the enhancement of "the reputation of the Associate of Arts degree" and continued stress on "the liberal arts and their important role in higher education" (p.14).

In addition to adopting marketing and development strategies that will maintain or increase enrollments, private junior colleges must ensure that they have the financial resources to provide a quality education. "Providing a quality education" in the 1990's entails not only having excellent teachers and a well-planned and solid curriculum and student services program, but also:

- having sufficient computer resources to ensure that students are computer literate;
- implementing a sufficiently sophisticated assessment program to measure the value-added benefits of a private junior college education and to inform efforts to improve school and program effectiveness; and
- maintaining facilities, library collections, and instructional support services.

Woodroof (1990) suggests that some of these goals may be achieved through cooperative programs and shared resources with local community colleges. Smith (1990) contends that the employment of part-time faculty can afford critical financial savings, but underscores the importance of achieving an optimum ratio between adjunct faculty and full-time faculty in order to balance cost and quality. Hoffman (1990) stresses the importance of careful control and governance, arguing that private junior colleges that are forced to end their existence "probably do so because of inept leadership, fiscal mismanagement, and a lack of vision and planning" (p.16).

Conclusion

The potential for private junior colleges to survive into the 21st century depends upon their ability to effectively market their strengths, expand their enrollment bases, operate in a fiscally responsible manner, and maintain strong leadership and a committed faculty. Given these conditions, private junior colleges will continue to play a valuable role in the American system of higher education.

References

The majority of the articles cited in this digest appeared in *The Viability of the Private Junior College*, New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 69, edited by Robert H. Woodroof and published by Jossey-Bass Publishers in Spring 1990. These articles are: "A History of Resilience," by Robert H. Woodroof (a) (p.3-8); "The Private Junior College in Higher Education's Future," by Nelson M. Hoffman, Jr. (p.9-18); "A Professional Approach to Marketing the Private Junior College," by Peter T. Mitchell. (p.19-32); "Expanding the Religious Heterogeneity of the Student Body," by George D. Fields, Jr. (p.43-46); "The Adjunct/Full-Time Faculty Ratio," by Milton L. Smith (p.61-72); "Doubts about the Future of the Private Liberal Arts Junior College," by Robert H. Woodroof (b) (p.73-82).

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